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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000077

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

ALSO FOR I/O A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK

P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY

USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER

NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC MARR MOPS LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: SLEIMAN UNDER PRESSURE ON GAZA;

PALESTINIAN CAMPS CONTAINED, SAYS MINISTER HARIRI

Classified By: Charge William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) In a January 16 meeting with Charge, Minister of Education and Sidon native Bahia Hariri described the situation in the southern Palestinian camp of Ain el-Hilweh as tense, but "contained" as the Gaza crisis continues. She said the strong stance in support of Gaza by President Michel Sleiman and other Lebanese leaders had helped quiet the situation in the camps. However, Hariri noted the changing character of more recent Gaza-related protests and comments by opposition media that seemed to be pushing Sleiman to take a more vocal role in support of the Palestinians in Gaza. Other contacts echoed this, citing an aggressive campaign on the part of the opposition to pressure Sleiman to attend the Arab meetyQI7Uci

*oQ#y since fighting erupted in Gaza.

Expressing concern that schools could become centers of anger, Hariri said she encouraged activities to enable to student to express their emotion in non-violent ways. (Note: Students from Sidon holding a mock UN Security Council meeting at a Hariri-foundation school issued a resolution calling for a cease fire and lifting of the blockade. with the U.S. representative confirming the "necessity of the cease-fire and withdrawal of Israeli forces of Gaza. End note.)

¶14. (C) Hariri opined that the meeting between Arab League leaders in Doha January 17 would not change the situation in Gaza. Hariri said President Sleiman and other Lebanese leaders' strong stands against the situation in Gaza had helped keep the camps relatively quiet. However, she opined that the demonstrations throughout Lebanon were beginning to change character. Protests that started as mainly student-based are now becoming political; the opposition media and demonstrators, such as those near the U.S. Embassy on January 14, are placing pressure on Sleiman to take a stronger stance on Gaza.

PREVIOUS WORK PAYING OFF

¶15. (C) Hariri told charge that three years ago, she decided to work to improve the relations between Lebanese in Sidon and Palestinians in Ain el-Hilweh. She meets monthly with Palestinian factions of Ain el-Hilweh, except Ahmed Jibril's

Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP-GC). However, PFLP-GC sends representatives to Hariri's meetings. Hariri said her ties into the camps go deeper than just relations with leaders, to second and third-level actors also.

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¶6. (C) After the 2007 fighting in the Nahr el-Barid Palestinian camp between Lebanese Armed Forces and Fatah al-Islam, Hariri started the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue in Sidon, a 65-member group elected at the grass-roots level to run civic activities and to improve relations between the camp and the city. Hamas is part of the group, as are some Islamists, she said. After fighting erupted in Gaza, Hariri said she held meetings with Fatah and Hamas together, in order to prevent the fractures among the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza from transferring into the camps in Lebanon. Hariri described a "solidarity" rally for Gaza held in Ain el-Hilweh that included both Fatah and Hamas supporters as evidence of the success of her efforts.

CONCERN ABOUT ROCKET ATTACKS
AGAINST ISRAEL

¶7. (C) Hariri expressed fear about the two recent episodes of rockets being fired from Lebanon to Israel. According to Hariri, the "party in charge" in the south is well known, a clear reference to Hizballah, even if they may have "given the rockets to someone else" to launch. Hariri supported LAF and UNIFIL efforts and said the GOL "is trying" to maintain control of its territory.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Palestinian camps in Lebanon have been calm during the Gaza crisis. We believe the efforts among Sunni Lebanese and Palestinians by the well-connected Minister Hariri have contributed to that.

¶9. (C) In addition to Hariri, other contacts have commented on the mounting pressure on President Sleiman to go to Doha to demonstrate Lebanon's support for the Palestinians in Gaza. Protesters (including a group near the U.S. Embassy on January 14) criticized Sleiman for being weak and called for a "strong" president like his Syrian-picked predecessor, Emile Lahoud. Lahoud himself told Hizballah's al-Manar TV that it was "shameful" for Lebanon to be neutral, saying also that Qatar had played a major role in resolving Lebanon's political standoff, leading to the election of Sleiman. March 14 contacts tells us the opposition jumped on the bandwagon as well, with Nasrallah aide Hussein Khalil and Amal MP Hassan Khahil meeting with Sleiman at Baabda Palace on January 14, and Marada leader Suleiman Franjieh reportedly calling him. We suspect their motives had more to do with boosting the pro-Iranian Arab camp at the expense of pro-western moderates Egypt and Saudi Arabia, who did go to Doha. As usual, it appears Sleiman wanted to avoid appearing too biased toward one side (in this case, too pro-March 14), and went to Doha to participate in "consultations" on Gaza.

End comment.

GRANT